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ABSTRACT

The establishment of university microcomputer services for the public has at least two purposes: the promotion of the image of the institution with widely diverse groups and the maximization of the university's capital investment. The first step in planning to serve the public is to undertake a needs assessment by locating target populations through official and unofficial contacts with community groups. Next, flyers should be sent to inform prospective users and stimulate participation by outlining possible university services. University workshops might be developed for organizations interested in university assistance; at such meetings, handouts and discussions could outline university microcomputer services, and groups could be encouraged to assess their need for computer training. Courses designed for the public should not include programming, but instead should concentrate on applications such as word processing and the uses of databases, spreadsheets, and drawing programs. Many home computer owners also want information on purchasing computer equipment. Additional considerations when establishing a program for the public include optimum scheduling and the provision of individual support for participants. It is also important for workshop participants to have a product to take home with them after every session. (KM)

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UNIVERSITY MICROCOMPUTER SERVICES FOR THE PUBLIC

When university computer resources were young, the most important computer service of the university was sharing time on a mainframe with industry, commercial institutions, and public agencies such as schools. Installation of microcomputer laboratories in universities now supply new and different occasions to serve a more varied public with another kind of resource---the microcomputer.

Establishment of university microcomputer services for the public has at least two purposes. First, since there is extensive general interest in computers, using microcomputer resources of the university to serve the public promotes the image of the institution with widely diverse groups. Second, universities usually make considerable capital investment in microcomputer laboratories, which may not be used to capacity. A survey often reveals a timespan when such laboratories could host others than members of the university community, thus maximizing use of the capital investment.

The first step in planning to serve the public is to make a needs assessment by locating target populations, possible recipients of services, through official and unofficial contacts with community groups. Initial lists can be obtained from local Chambers of Commerce, unions, senior centers, employment agencies or just the yellow pages of the telephone book. Industries newly established in a community should be contacted to identify computer training courses needed by workers and staff. Although computer activities

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for community organizations are most often initiated by university departments of continuing education, teacher education, engineering, or mathematics, other university departments should take part in community outreach for their computer facilities and faculty computer expertise.

What are schools in the community doing with computer education? What computer education ideas do schools in other communities have that might be useful in the local school system, ideas in which the university might play a part? Members of a university teacher-education unit might look carefully at what local school corporations are able to provide to teachers, students, and parents, finding unserved or underserved groups whose needs can be met through computer facilities and training designs provided by the university as a supplement to what is being done by schools.

In many states, teachers now have a choice of paths to certification and permanent licenses. Credits gained from workshops supply opportunities for participation of universities in these new patterns of teacher education. School systems may need workshops they themselves do not have the personnel and physical resources to conduct. State grants often support for university-school collaboration. Focusing on a special educational interest of the moment is a key to tapping into support from a funding agency which might underwrite credit or provide stipends to workshop participants. Special populations of children whom schools do not serve or underserve are fertile ground for university-developed computer assisted learning: pre-school and private

school children; students preparing for standardized tests; and children with disabilities in math, reading, or writing.

Special interest groups supply categories of target populations eager to learn about computers. Computer users for whose brands there is no local club welcome a campus-sponsored support group that provides a meeting place, a location to store and consult their program library, and help in problem-solving. New computer programs that serve certain computers or groups of users, programs like LOTUS, Appleworks, or others requiring more help from beginners than found in program documentation, furnish opportunities to offer short, non-credit courses. The shower of books which purport to solve computer problems posed by these programs indicate the presence of a need. University computer classes might undertake a project of writing or adapting programs suited to the needs of a company or of individual workers in a given occupation.

Universities have found that the list of possible groups to be served is endless. Technicians, such as engineers, who have worked with mainframes or terminals attached to minicomputers, like to freshen their skills on the microcomputer. Union representatives need to learn computer assisted methods for accumulating and analyzing data in preparation for bargaining activities. Politicians want to learn voter and opinion analysis. Churches and synods seek assistance in finance tracking and Bible research. Senior citizens want to understand what their children and grandchildren know about computers. Club program makers want

to use the college computer laboratory for special programs.

Executives would rather learn to use computers that are arriving on their desktops in a setting separate from their office turf. Lawyers are relieved to learn they can access law library resources with a few key presses and avoid long hours spent tracking down precedents. Genealogy buffs are pleased to find they can add newly-discovered great-great-great Aunt Jenny to a branch without re-drawing the whole family tree. They discover that they can access the great genealogical libraries with a modem.

Local musicians want to investigate electronic music. Newcomers, or old-timers as well, in police work, real estate sales, hospital administration or insurance work need to learn how the computer can accelerate record keeping and access. Learning foreign language by computer is useful to workers in companies that have foreign sales and to those planning to live, work, or travel abroad. The coming of computer assisted drawing requires retraining for commercial artists, hobbyists, creative artists, engineers, and architects. Desktop publishing brings fresh possibilities to newsletter editors. The whole dictionary of occupations and interests supplies possible participants in computer activities.

When a list of target groups has been accumulated, flyers should be sent to inform and stimulate participation by outlining possible university services. Clubs making programs for the coming year should receive a flyer each spring, outlining university offerings of both one-time and

series computer events. Such activities can be listed on speculation and later cancelled if not enough enrollees are attracted to make the offering worthwhile. Each group might be invited to send a representative to a university workshop scheduled for organizations interested in university assistance. At such meetings handouts and discussions outline university microcomputer services, and groups are encouraged to assess their need for computer training.

The university will find that proprietary interests are trying to exploit these public needs. Unfortunately for many who seek help from store-front or chain operators, teachers of such classes are often limited, both in teaching skills and knowledge of content. Facilities often provide a ratio of only one computer to several students. Sometimes there is no hands-on training at all. Since money-making, not teaching, is their objective, course cost is frequently exorbitant. Another motive that skews instruction in such courses is the desire to sell one brand of computer or program. Teachers are often furnished free to a local computer store as a promotion for a product. The store then charges the customer and keeps the fees.

What should be taught in courses for the public? First, the activities in a course should not be programming, unless that is the subject of the course. Most computer users do little programming. In the early days, when there were few attractive commercial and public domain programs available, nobody knew what else to do with a computer. In these days of superb applications computer programs for a vast variety

of activities, an amateur who creates home-made programs is reinventing the wheel. Computer users need to learn to use applications---the applications that are of most use to the most people---word processing and the uses of data bases, spreadsheets, and drawing programs.

Home computer owners are interested in programs for children and simple accounting programs that enable them to track investments, make property inventories, and compute taxes, loan and mortgage payments, and checkbook records. They want to know how to purchase reliable and inexpensive equipment and programs. Many are interested in typing lessons. An older generation did not take typing in school in all school tracks. Most typing courses were for business majors. Many are interested in software festivals of general interest programs---games of health, travel, and just pure fun. Most enrollees love terminology, but forget the words "computer literacy"---an insulting term and one that has gathered some well-deserved ill-repute because it has never been really defined. Perhaps a good definition of "computer literacy," if one is needed, is "knowing whatever you want to know to use the computer in your home, work, and hobbies."

Optimum scheduling for programs should be studied. Senior citizens, for instance, do not like to come out at night or when weather is bad. Parking is important to them. Sessions should be between one and three hours. Students need to "settle in." Supply one computer per person. Students from computer classes can be assigned to give individual help during hands-on sessions. Individual support

is important to beginners. This process is useful in nailing down concepts for helpers as well. Solicit scholarships or sponsorships from local industrial or commercial firms to carry some of the cost or ask release time for a member of the firm to help during class sessions.

Workshop participants should have a product to take home with them after every session---a type letter or a PRINT SHOP product. Schedule one session where each participant can bring a friend. Guests become future enrollees. Give a fancy certificate at the end of the course.

Happy computing to you and your community!